

9

Structured interviewing

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Chapter guide

The structured interview is one of a variety of forms of research interview, but it is the one that is most commonly employed in survey research. The goal of the structured interview is for the interviewing of respondents to be standardized so that differences between interviews in any research project are minimized. As a result, there are many guidelines about how structured interviewing should be carried out so that variation in the conduct of interviews is small. The chapter explores:

- the reasons why the structured interview is a prominent research method in survey research; this issue entails a consideration of the importance of standardization to the process of measurement;
- the different contexts of interviewing, such as the use of more than one interviewer and whether the administration of the interview is in person or by telephone;
- various prerequisites of structured interviewing, including: establishing rapport with the interviewee; asking questions as they appear on the interview schedule; recording exactly what is said by interviewees; ensuring there are clear instructions on the interview schedule concerning question sequencing and the recording of answers; and keeping to the question order as it appears on the schedule;
- problems with structured interviewing, including: the influence of the interviewer on respondents and the possibility of systematic bias in answers (known as response sets); the feminist critique of structured interview, which raises a distinctive cluster of problems with the method, is also examined.

Introduction

The interview is a common occurrence in social life, because there are many different forms of interview. There are job interviews, media interviews, social work interviews, police interviews, appraisal interviews. And then there are research interviews, which represent the kind of interview that will be covered in this and other chapters (such as Chapters 20 and 21). These different kinds of interview share some common features, such as the eliciting of information by the interviewer from the interviewee and the operation of rules of varying degrees of formality or explicitness concerning the conduct of the interview.

In the social research interview, the aim is for the interviewer to elicit from the interviewee or *respondent*, as he or she is frequently called in survey research, all manner of information: interviewees' own behaviour or that of others; attitudes; norms; beliefs; and values. There are many different types or styles of research interview, but the kind that is primarily employed in survey research is the structured interview, which is the focus of this chapter. Other kinds of interview will be briefly mentioned in this chapter but will be discussed in greater detail in later chapters.



The structured interview

The research interview is a prominent data-collection strategy in both quantitative and qualitative research. The survey is probably the chief context within which social researchers employ the structured interview (see Key concept 9.1) in connection with quantitative research, and it is this form of the interview that will be

emphasized in this chapter. The **structured interview** is one of the two main ways of administering a survey research instrument, and its main forms are briefly outlined in Figure 8.2. This figure should be consulted as a background to this chapter and Chapter 10.



Key concept 9.1

What is a structured interview?

A structured interview, sometimes called a *standardized interview*, entails the administration of an interview schedule by an interviewer. The aim is for all interviewees to be given exactly the same context of questioning. This means that each respondent receives exactly the same interview stimulus as any other. The goal of this style of interviewing is to ensure that interviewees' replies can be aggregated, and this can be achieved reliably only if those replies are in response to identical cues. Interviewers are supposed to read out questions exactly and in the same order as they are printed on the schedule. Questions are usually very specific and very often offer the interviewee a fixed range of answers (this type of question is often called *closed*, *closed ended*, *pre-coded*, or *fixed choice*). The structured interview is the typical form of interview in survey research.



Thinking deeply 9.1

Common sources of error in survey research

There are many sources of error in survey research in addition to those associated with sampling. This is a list of the principal sources of error:

1. a poorly worded question;
2. the way the question is asked by the interviewer;
3. misunderstanding on the part of the interviewee;
4. memory problems on the part of the interviewee;
5. the way the information is recorded by the interviewer;
6. the way the information is processed, either when answers are coded or when data are entered into the computer.

The reason why survey researchers typically prefer the structured interview is that it promotes standardization of *both* the asking of questions *and* the recording of answers. This feature has two closely related virtues from the perspective of quantitative research: reducing error due to variation in the asking of questions, and greater accuracy in and ease of processing respondents' answers.

Reducing error due to interviewer variability

The standardization of both the asking of questions and the recording of answers means that, if the interview is properly executed, variation in people's replies will be due to 'true' or 'real' variation and not due to the interview context. To take a simple illustration, when we ask a question that is supposed to be an indicator of a concept,

we want to keep error to a minimum, an issue that was touched on at the end of Chapter 8. We can think of the answers to a question as constituting the values that a variable takes. These values, of course, exhibit variation. This could be the question on alcohol consumption among students that was a focus of Chapter 8 at certain points. Students will vary in the number of alcohol units they consume (as in Figure 9.1). However, some respondents may be inaccurately classified in terms of the variable. There are a number of possible reasons for this (see Thinking deeply 9.1).

Most variables will contain an element of error, so that it is helpful to think of variation as made up of two components: true variation and error. In other words:

$$\text{variation} = \text{true variation} + \text{variation due to error.}$$

The aim is to keep the error component to a minimum (see Figure 9.2), since error has an adverse effect on the

Figure 9.1

A variable

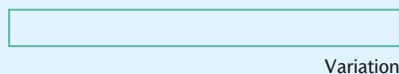


Figure 9.2

A variable with little error

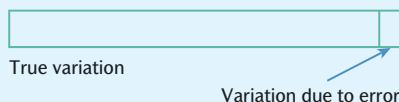
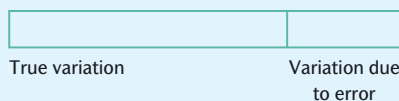


Figure 9.3

A variable with considerable error



validity of a measure. If the error component is quite high (see Figure 9.3), validity will be jeopardized. The significance for error of standardization in the structured interview is that two sources of variation due to error—the second and fifth in Thinking deeply 9.1—are likely to be less pronounced, since the opportunity for variation in interviewer behaviour in these two areas (asking questions and recording answers) is reduced.

The significance of standardization and of thereby reducing interviewer variability is this: assuming that there is no problem with an interview question due to such things as confusing terms or ambiguity (an issue that will be examined in Chapter 11), we want to be able to say as far as possible that the variation that we find is connected with true variation between interviewees and not to variation in the way a question was asked or the answers recorded in the course of the administration of a survey by structured interview. Variability can occur in either of

two ways. First, *intra-interviewer variability*, whereby an interviewer is not consistent in the way he or she asks questions and/or records answers. Second, when there is more than one interviewer, there may be *inter-interviewer variability*, whereby interviewers are not consistent with each other in the ways they ask questions and/or record answers. Needless to say, these two sources of variability are not mutually exclusive; they can coexist, compounding the problem even further. In view of the significance of standardization, it is hardly surprising that some writers prefer to call the structured interview a *standardized interview* (e.g. Oppenheim 1992) or *standardized survey interview* (e.g. Fowler and Mangione 1990).

Accuracy and ease of data processing

Like self-completion questionnaires, most structured interviews contain mainly questions that are variously referred to as *closed*, *closed ended*, *pre-coded*, or *fixed choice*. This issue will be covered in detail in Chapter 11. However, this type of question has considerable relevance to the current discussion. With the **closed question**, the respondent is given a limited choice of possible answers. In other words, the interviewer provides respondents with two or more possible answers and asks them to select which one or ones apply. Ideally, this procedure will simply entail the interviewer placing a tick in a box by the answer(s) selected by a respondent or circling the selected answer or using a similar procedure. The advantage of this practice is that the potential for interviewer variability is reduced: there is no problem of whether the interviewer writes down everything that the respondent says or of misinterpretation of the reply given. If an *open* or *open-ended* question is asked, the interviewer may not write down everything said, may embellish what is said, or may misinterpret what is said.

However, the advantages of the closed question in the context of survey research go further than this, as we will see in Chapter 11. One advantage that is particularly significant in the context of the present discussion is that closed questions greatly facilitate the processing of data. When an open question is asked, the answers need to be sifted and *coded* in order for the data to be analysed quantitatively. Not only is this a laborious procedure, particularly if there is a large number of open questions and/or of respondents; it also introduces the potential for another source of error, which is the sixth in Thinking deeply 9.1: it is quite likely that error will be introduced as a result of variability in the coding of answers. When open questions are asked, the interviewer is supposed to write down as much of what is said as possible. Answers

can, therefore, be in the form of several sentences. These answers have to be examined and then categorized, so that each person's answer can be aggregated with other respondents' answers to a certain question. A number will then be allocated to each category of answer, so that the answers can then be entered into a computer database and analysed quantitatively. This general process is known as coding and will be examined in greater detail in Chapter 11.

Coding introduces yet another source of error. First, if the rules for assigning answers to categories, collectively known as the **coding frame**, are flawed, the variation that is observed will not reflect the true variation in interviewees' replies. Second, there may be variability in the ways in which answers are categorized. As with interviewing, there can be two sources: *intra-coder variability*, whereby the coder varies over time in the way in which the rules for assigning answers to categories are implemented, and *inter-coder variability*, whereby coders differ from each other in the way in which the rules for assigning answers to categories are implemented. If either (or both) source(s) of variability occur, at least part of the variation in interviewees' replies will not reflect true variation and instead will be caused by error.

The closed question sidesteps this problem neatly, because respondents allocate *themselves* to categories. The coding process is then a simple matter of attaching a different number to each category of answer and of entering the numbers into a computer database. It is not surprising, therefore, that this type of question is often referred to as pre-coded, because decisions about the coding of answers are typically undertaken as part of the design of the schedule—that is, before any respondents have actually been asked questions. There is very little opportunity for interviewers or coders to vary in the recording or the coding of answers. Of course, if some

respondents misunderstand any terms in the alternative answers with which they are presented, or if the answers do not adequately cover the appropriate range of possibilities, the question will not provide a valid measure. However, that is a separate issue and one that will be returned to in Chapter 11. The chief point to register about closed questions for the moment is that, when compared to open questions, they reduce one potential source of error *and* are much easier to process for quantitative data analysis.

Other types of interview

The structured interview is by no means the only type of interview, but it is certainly the main type that is likely to be encountered in survey research and in quantitative research generally. Unfortunately, a host of different terms have been employed by writers on research methodology to distinguish the diverse forms of research interview. Key concept 9.2 represents an attempt to capture some of the major terms and types.

All the forms of interview outlined in Key concept 9.2, with the exception of the *structured interview* and the *standardized interview*, are primarily used in connection with qualitative research, and it is in that context that they will be encountered again later in this book. They are rarely used in connection with quantitative research, and survey research in particular, because the absence of standardization in the asking of questions and recording of answers makes respondents' replies difficult to aggregate and to process. This is not to say that they have no role at all. For example, as we will see in Chapter 11, the unstructured or semi-structured interview can have a useful role in relation to developing the fixed-choice alternatives with which respondents are provided in the kind of closed question that is typical of the structured interview.



Key concept 9.2 Major types of interview

- *Structured interview*. See Key concept 9.1.
- *Standardized interview*. See Key concept 9.1.
- *Semi-structured interview*. This is a term that covers a wide range of instances. It typically refers to a context in which the interviewer has a series of questions that are in the general form of an interview schedule but is able to vary the sequence of questions. The questions are frequently somewhat more general in their frame of reference from that typically found in a structured interview schedule. Also, the interviewer usually has some latitude to ask further questions in response to what are seen as significant replies.

- *Unstructured interview.* The interviewer typically has only a list of topics or issues, often called an interview guide or *aide-mémoire*, that are to be covered. The style of questioning is usually informal. The phrasing and sequencing of questions will vary from interview to interview.
- *Intensive interview.* This term is employed by Lofland and Lofland (1995) as an alternative term to the unstructured interview. Spradley (1979) uses the term ethnographic interview to describe a form of interview that is also more or less synonymous with the unstructured interview.
- *Qualitative interview.* For some writers, this term seems to denote an unstructured interview (e.g. Mason 1996), but more frequently it is a general term that embraces interviews of both the semi-structured and unstructured kind (e.g. Rubin and Rubin 1995).
- *In-depth interview.* Like the term 'qualitative interview', this one sometimes refers to an unstructured interview but more often refers to both semi-structured and unstructured interviewing. The use of this term seems to be increasing.
- *Focused interview.* This is a term devised by Merton et al. (1956) to refer to an interview using predominantly open questions to ask interviewees questions about a specific situation or event that is relevant to them and of interest to the researcher.
- *Focus group.* This is the same as the focused interview, but interviewees discuss the specific issue in groups. See Key concept 21.1 for a more detailed definition.
- *Group interview.* Some writers see this term as synonymous with the focus group, but a distinction may be made between the latter and a situation in which members of a group discuss a variety of matters that may be only partially related.
- *Oral history interview.* This is an unstructured or semi-structured interview in which the respondent is asked to recall events from his or her past and to reflect on them. There is usually a cluster of fairly specific research concerns to do with a particular epoch or event, so there is some resemblance to a focused interview (see the section on 'Life history and oral history interviewing' in Chapter 20.).
- *Life history interview.* This is similar to the oral history interview, but the aim of this type of unstructured interview is to glean information on the entire biography of each respondent (see the section on 'Life history and oral history interviewing' in Chapter 20.)



Interview contexts

In an archetypal interview, an interviewer stands or sits in front of the respondent asking the latter a series of questions and writing down the answers. However, there are several possible departures from it, although this archetype is the most usual context for an interview.

More than one interviewee

In the case of group interviews or focus groups, there is more than one, and usually quite a few more than one, respondent or interviewee. Nor is this the only context in which more than one person is interviewed. McKee and Bell (1985), for example, interviewed couples in their study of the impact of male unemployment, while, in

my research on visitors to Disney theme parks, not just couples but often their children took part in the interview as well (Bryman 1999). However, it is very unusual for structured interviews to be used in connection with this kind of questioning. In survey research, it is almost always a specific individual who is the object of questioning. Indeed, in survey interviews it is very advisable to discourage as far as possible the presence and intrusion of others during the course of the interview. Investigations in which more than one person is being interviewed tend to be exercises in qualitative research, though this is not always the case: Pahl's (1990) study of patterns of control of money among couples employed structured interviewing of couples and of husbands and wives separately.

More than one interviewer

This is a very unusual situation in social research, because of the considerable cost that is involved in dispatching two (or indeed more than two) people to interview someone. Bechhofer et al. (1984) describe research in which two people interviewed individuals in a wide range of occupations. However, while their approach achieved a number of benefits for them, their interviewing style was of the unstructured kind that is typically employed in qualitative research, and they argue that the presence of a second interviewer is unlikely to achieve any added value in the context of structured interviewing.

In person or by telephone?

A third way in which the archetype may not be realized is that interviews may be conducted by telephone rather than face-to-face. While telephone interviewing is quite common in commercial fields like market research, where it usually takes the form of computer-assisted telephone interviewing (CATI; see below), it is still far more customary to read reports of studies based on face-to-face interviews in academic social research, but see Research in focus 9.1 for an interesting example.



Research in focus 9.1

A telephone survey of the unemployed in Sweden

Nordenmark and Strandh (1999) report the findings of an interesting study of mental well-being among the unemployed in Sweden. Early in 1996 a national random sample of 3,500 was drawn from a register of all unemployed persons that is maintained by the Swedish Labour Market Board. A telephone survey was conducted with members of the sample. The response rate was 74 per cent. The interview schedule included questions on such issues as 'mental well-being, the economy, work involvement, belief in the future, wage demands and job search behaviour' (Nordenmark and Strandh 1999: 585). Nearly two years later, those who had participated were re-interviewed by telephone with very similar questions. This is, therefore, an example of a *panel study*. The authors inform us that only part (around 6 per cent) of the 26 per cent who did not respond was due to a refusal to participate; the remainder was due to problems of contacting respondents.

There are several advantages of telephone over personal interviews.

- On a like-for-like basis, they are far cheaper and also quicker to administer. This arises because, for personal interviews, interviewers have to spend a great deal of time and money travelling between respondents. This factor will be even more pronounced when a sample is geographically dispersed, a problem that is only partially mitigated for personal interview surveys by strategies like cluster sampling. Of course, telephone interviews take time and hired interviewers have to be paid, but the cost of conducting a telephone interview will still be lower than a comparable personal one. Moreover, the general efficiency of telephone interviewing has been enhanced with the advent and widespread use in commercial circles of computer-assisted telephone interviewing (CATI).
- The telephone interview is easier to supervise than the personal interview. This is a particular advantage when there are several interviewers, since it becomes easier to check on interviewers' transgressions in the asking of questions, such as rephrasing questions or the inappropriate use of probes by the interviewer. Interviews can be tape-recorded so that data quality can be assessed, but this raises issues that relate to data protection and confidentiality, so that this procedure has to be treated cautiously.
- Telephone interviewing has a further advantage, which is to do with evidence (which is not as clear-cut as one might want) that suggests that, in personal interviews, respondents' replies are sometimes affected by characteristics of the interviewer (for example, class, ethnicity) and indeed by his or her mere presence (implying that the interviewees may reply in ways they feel will be deemed desirable by interviewers). The remoteness of the interviewer in telephone interviewing removes this potential source of bias to a significant extent. The interviewer's personal characteristics cannot be seen, and the fact that he or she is

not physically present may offset the likelihood of respondents' answers being affected by the interviewer.

Telephone interviewing suffers from certain limitations when compared to the personal interview.

- People who do not own or who are not contactable by telephone obviously cannot be interviewed by telephone. Since this characteristic is most likely to be a feature of poorer households, the potential for sampling bias exists. Also, many people choose to be ex-directory—that is, they have taken action for their telephone numbers not to appear in a telephone directory. Again, these people cannot be interviewed by telephone. One possible solution to this last difficulty is *random digit dialling*. With this technique, the computer randomly selects telephone numbers within a predefined geographical area. Not only is this a random process that conforms to the rules about probability sampling examined in Chapter 8; it also stands a chance of getting at ex-directory households. But it cannot, of course, gain access to those without a telephone at all.
- Respondents with hearing impairments are likely to find telephone interviewing much more difficult for them than personal interviewing.
- The length of a telephone interview is unlikely to be sustainable beyond 20–25 minutes, whereas personal interviews can be much longer than this (Frey 2004).
- The question of whether response rates (see Key concept 8.2) are lower with surveys by telephone interview than with surveys by personal interview is unclear, in that there is little consistent evidence on this question. However, there is a general belief that telephone interviews achieve slightly lower rates than personal interviews (Frey and Oishi 1995; Shuy 2002; Frey 2004).
- There is some evidence to suggest that telephone interviews fare less well for the asking of questions about sensitive issues, such as drug and alcohol use, income, tax returns, and health. However, the evidence is not entirely consistent on this point, though it is probably sufficient to suggest that, when many questions of this kind are to be used, a personal interview may be superior (Shuy 2002).
- Developments in telephone communications such as the growing use of answerphones and other forms of call screening and of mobile phones have almost certainly had an adverse effect on telephone surveys in terms of response rates and the general difficulty of

getting access to respondents through conventional landlines. Households that rely exclusively on mobile phones represent a particular difficulty.

- Telephone interviewers cannot engage in observation. This means that they are not in a position to respond to signs of puzzlement or unease on the faces of respondents when they are asked a question. In a personal interview, the interviewer may respond to such signs by restating the question or attempting to clarify the meaning of the question, though this has to be handled in a standardized way as far as possible. A further issue relating to the inability of the interviewer to observe is that, sometimes, interviewers may be asked to collect subsidiary information in connection with their visits (for example, whether a house is dilapidated). Such information cannot be collected when telephone interviews are employed.
- It is frequently the case that specific individuals in households or firms are the targets of an interview. In other words, simply anybody will not do. This requirement is likely to arise from the specifications of the population to be sampled, which means that people in a certain role or position or with particular characteristics are to be interviewed. It is probably more difficult to ascertain by telephone interview whether the correct person is replying.
- The telephone interviewer cannot readily employ visual aids such as show cards (see below) from which respondents might be asked to select their replies or to use diagrams or photographs.
- There is some evidence to suggest that the quality of data derived from telephone interviews is inferior to that of comparable face-to-face interviews. A series of experiments reported by Holbrook et al. (2003) on the mode of survey administration in the USA using long questionnaires found that respondents interviewed by telephone were more likely to: express no opinion or 'don't know' (see Chapter 11 for more on this issue); to answer in the same way to a series of linked questions; to express socially desirable answers; to be apprehensive about the interview; and to be more likely to be dissatisfied with the time taken by the interviews (even though they were invariably shorter than in the face-to-face mode). Also, telephone interviewees tended to be less engaged with the interview process. While these results should be viewed with caution, since studies like these are bound to be affected by such factors as the use of a large questionnaire on a national sample, they do provide interesting food for thought.

Computer-assisted interviewing

In recent years, increasing use has been made of computers in the interviewing process, especially in commercial survey research of the kind conducted by market research and opinion polling organizations. There are two main formats for computer-assisted interviewing: computer-assisted personal interviewing (CAPI) and computer-assisted telephone interviewing (CATI). A very large percentage of telephone interviews is conducted with the aid of personal computers. Among commercial survey organizations, almost all telephone interviewing is of the CATI kind nowadays, and this kind of interview has become one of the most popular formats for such firms. The main reasons for the growing use of CAPI has been that the increased portability and affordability of 'laptop' computers, and the growth in the number and quality of software packages that provide a platform for devising interview schedules, provide greater opportunity for them to be used in connection with face-to-face interviews. CAPI and CATI have not infiltrated academic survey research to anything like the same degree that they have commercial survey research, although that picture is likely to change considerably because of the many advantages they possess. Indeed, the survey element of the mixed methods study Cultural Capital and Social Exclusion (CCSE), referred to in Research in focus 2.9, was administered by CAPI. In any case, many of the large datasets that are used for secondary analysis (see Chapter 14 for examples) derive from computer-assisted interviewing studies undertaken by commercial or large social research organizations.

With computer-assisted interviewing, the questions that comprise an interview schedule appear on the screen. As interviewers ask each question, they 'key in' the appropriate reply using the keyboard (for open questions) or using a mouse (for closed questions) and proceed to the next question. Moreover, this process has the great advantage that, when *filter questions* (see Tips and skills 'Instructions for interviewers in the use of a filter question') are asked, so that certain answers may be skipped as a result of a person's reply, the computer can be programmed to 'jump' to the next relevant question. This removes the possibility of interviewers inadvertently asking inappropriate questions or failing to ask ones that should be asked. As such, computer-assisted interviewing enhances the degree of control over the interview process and can therefore improve standardization of the asking and recording of questions. However, there is very little evidence to suggest that the quality of data deriving from computer-assisted interviews is demonstrably

superior to comparable paper and pencil interviews (Couper and Hansen 2002). If the interviewer is out in the field all day, he or she can either take a disk with the saved data to the research office or send the data down a telephone line with the aid of a modem. It is possible that technophobic respondents may be a bit alarmed by their use, but, by and large, the use of computer-assisted interviewing seems destined to grow.

For their part, there is evidence that professional interviewers generally like computer-assisted interviewing, often feeling that it improves the image of their occupation, though there are many who are concerned about the problems that might arise from technical difficulties and the inconvenience of correcting errors with a computer as opposed to with a pen. One issue that sometimes disconcerts interviewers is the fact that they can see only part of the schedule at any one time (Couper and Hansen 2002). One potential problem with CAPI and CATI is 'miskeying', where the interviewer clicks on the wrong reply. Whether this is more likely to occur than when the interviewer is using pen and paper is unknown. In the CCSE study, as noted in Research in focus 2.9, qualitative interviews were conducted with some of the survey respondents. In part this was done so that participants in the semi-structured interview phase could be asked about some of the answers they had given in the survey interview. As a result, the researchers found that sometimes the participant had been recorded as giving a particular answer that was in fact incorrect. An example is a respondent who had been recorded as indicating in the survey interview as preferring to eat out in Italian restaurants when in fact it should have been Indian ones (Silva and Wright 2008). As the researchers note, it is impossible to know how this error occurred, but miskeying is one possible reason.

The discussion in the previous section of telephone interviewing and of CATI in this section presumes that the medium is a landline. However, with the huge growth in the use of mobile phones (cellular or cell phones) there is the prospect that these will have a role in future years. Since lists of mobile-phone users are unlikely to be available in the way that telephone directories are, random digit dialling (RDD) is most likely to be employed by researchers seeking to interview by mobile phone. Zuwallack (2009) reports the findings of some CATI projects conducted by mobile phone in the USA on health-related issues. The researchers found that a lot of people hung up when contacted but that those respondents who persisted formed a useful complement to conventional landline telephone surveys because many of them had characteristics often under-represented in such surveys,

such as young adults and minorities. Of particular interest is that a large percentage of respondents lived in households without a landline, suggesting that, if the number of mobile-only households increases, mobile-phone surveys may become increasingly significant. Zuwallack also reports that the mobile-phone survey is more expensive than the equivalent landline CATI survey.



Conducting interviews

Issues concerning the conduct of interviews are examined here in a very general way. In addition to the matters considered here, there is clearly the important issue of how to word the interview questions themselves. This area will be explored in Chapter 11, since many of the rules of question-asking relate to self-completion questionnaire techniques like postal questionnaires as well as to structured interviews. One further general point to make here is that the advice concerning the conduct of interviews provided in this chapter relates to structured interviews. The framework for carrying out the kinds of interviewing conducted in qualitative research (such as unstructured and semi-structured interviewing and focus groups) will be handled in later chapters.

Know the schedule

Before interviewing anybody, an interviewer should be fully conversant with the schedule. Even if you are the only person conducting interviews, make sure you know it inside out. Interviewing can be stressful for interviewers, and it is possible that under duress standard interview procedures like filter questions (see Tips and skills 'Instructions for interviewers in the use of a filter question') can cause interviewers to get flustered and miss questions out or ask the wrong questions. If two or more interviewers are involved, they need to be fully trained to know what is required of them and to know their way around the schedule. Training is especially important in order to reduce the likelihood of interviewer variability in the asking of questions, which is a source of error.

Introducing the research

Prospective respondents have to be provided with a credible rationale for the research in which they are being asked to participate and for giving up their valuable

One further point to register in connection with computer-assisted interviewing is that the section has not included **Internet surveys**. The reason for this is that such surveys are more properly considered as using self-completion questionnaires rather than structured interviewing (see Figure 8.2). With such surveys, there is no interviewer in the sense of a person who verbally asks questions. Internet surveys are covered in Chapter 28.

time. This aspect of conducting interview research is of particular significance at a time when response rates to survey research appear to be declining, though, as noted in Chapter 8, the evidence on this issue is the focus of some disagreement. The introductory rationale may be either spoken by the interviewer or written down. In many cases, respondents may be presented with both modes. It comes in spoken form in such situations as when interviewers make contact with respondents on the street or when they 'cold call' respondents in their homes in person or by telephone. A written rationale will be required to alert respondents that someone will be contacting them in person or on the telephone to request an interview. Respondents will frequently encounter both forms—for example, when they are sent a letter and then when they ask the interviewer who turns up to interview them what the research is all about. It is important for the two accounts to be consistent, as this could be a test!

Introductions to research should typically contain the bits of information outlined in Tips and skills 'Topics and issues to include in an introductory statement'. Since interviewers represent the interface between the research and the respondent, they have an important role in maximizing the response rate for the survey. In addition the following points should be borne in mind.

- Interviewers should be prepared to keep calling back if interviewees are out or unavailable. This will require taking into account people's likely work and leisure habits—for example, there is no point in calling at home on people who work during the day. In addition, people living alone may be reluctant to answer the door when it is dark because of fear of crime.
- Be self-assured. You may get a better response if you presume that people will agree to be interviewed rather than that they will refuse.

- Reassure people that you are not a salesperson. Because of the tactics of certain organizations whose representatives say they are doing market or social research, many people have become very suspicious of people saying they would just like to ask you a few questions.
- Dress in a way that will be acceptable to a wide spectrum of people.
- Make it clear that you will be happy to find a time to suit the respondent.

Rapport

It is frequently suggested that it is important for the interviewer to achieve *rapport* with the respondent. This means that very quickly a relationship must be established that encourages the respondent to want (or at least be prepared) to participate in and persist with the interview. Unless an element of rapport can be established, some respondents may initially agree to be

interviewed but then decide to terminate their participation because of the length of time the interview is taking or perhaps because of the nature of the questions being asked. While this injunction essentially invites the interviewer to be friendly with respondents and to put them at ease, it is important that this quality is not stretched too far. Too much rapport may result in the interview going on too long and the respondent suddenly deciding that too much time is being spent on the activity. Also, the mood of friendliness may result in the respondent answering questions in a way that is designed to please the interviewer. The achievement of rapport between interviewer and respondent is therefore a delicate balancing act. Moreover, it is probably somewhat easier to achieve in the context of the face-to-face interview than in the telephone interview, since in the latter the interviewer is unable to offer obvious visual cues of friendliness such as smiling or maintaining good eye contact, which are also frequently regarded as conducive to gaining and maintaining rapport.



Tips and skills

Topics and issues to include in an introductory statement

There are several issues to include in an introductory statement to a prospective interviewee. The following list comprises the principal considerations.

- Make clear the identity of the person who is contacting the respondent.
- Identify the auspices under which the research is being conducted—for example, a university, a market research agency.
- Mention any research funder, or, if you are a student doing an undergraduate or postgraduate dissertation or doing research for a thesis, make this clear.
- Indicate what the research is about in broad terms and why it is important, and give an indication of the kind of information to be collected.
- Indicate why the respondent has been selected—for example, selected by a random process.
- Make it clear that participation is voluntary.
- Reassure the respondent that he or she will not be identified or be identifiable in any way. This can usually be achieved by pointing out that data are anonymized when they are entered into the computer and that analysis will be conducted at an aggregate level.
- Provide reassurance about the confidentiality of any information provided.
- Provide the respondent with the opportunity to ask any questions—for example, provide a contact telephone number if the introduction is in the form of a written statement, or, if in person, simply ask if the respondent has any questions.

These suggestions are also relevant to the covering letter that accompanies postal questionnaires, except that researchers using this method need to remember to include a stamped-addressed envelope!

Asking questions

It was earlier suggested that one of the aims of the structured interview is to ensure that each respondent is asked exactly the same questions. Recall that in Thinking deeply 9.1 it was pointed out that variation in the ways a question is asked is a potential source of error in survey research. The structured interview is meant to reduce the likelihood of this occurring, but it cannot guarantee that this will not occur, because there is always the possibility that interviewers will embellish or otherwise change a question when it is asked. There is considerable evidence that this occurs, even among centres of social research that have a solid reputation for being rigorous in following correct methodological protocol (Bradburn and Sudman 1979). The problem with such variation in the asking of questions was outlined above: it is likely to engender variation in replies that does not reflect 'true' variation—in other words, error. Consequently, it is important for interviewers to appreciate the importance of keeping exactly to the wording of the questions they are charged with asking.

You might say: 'does it really matter?' In other words, surely small variations to wording cannot make a significant difference to people's replies? While the impact of variation in wording obviously differs from context to context and is in any case difficult to quantify exactly, experiments in question-wording suggest that even small variations in wording can exert an impact on replies (Schuman and Presser 1981). Three experiments in England conducted by Social and Community Planning Research concluded that a considerable number of interview questions is affected by interviewer variability. The researchers estimated that, for about two-thirds of the questions that were considered, interviewers contributed to less than 2 per cent of the total variation in each question (M. Collins 1997). On the face of it, this is a small amount of error, but the researchers regarded it as a cause for concern.

The key point to emerge, then, is the importance of getting across to interviewers the importance of asking questions as they are written. There are many reasons why interviewers may vary question-wording, such as reluctance to ask certain questions, perhaps because of embarrassment (M. Collins 1997), but the general admonition to keep to the wording of the question needs to be constantly reinforced when interviewers are being trained. It also needs to be borne in mind for your own research.

Recording answers

An identical warning for identical reasons can be registered in connection with the recording of answers by interviewers, who should write down respondents' replies as exactly as possible. Not to do so can result in interviewers distorting respondents' answers and hence introducing error. Such errors are less likely to occur when the interviewer has merely to allocate respondents' replies to a category, as in a closed question. This process can require a certain amount of interpretation on the part of the interviewer, but the error that is introduced is far less than when answers to open questions are being written down (Fowler and Mangione 1990).

Clear instructions

In addition to instructions about the asking of questions and the recording of answers, interviewers need instructions about their progress through an interview schedule. An example of the kind of context in which this is likely to occur is in relation to *filter questions*. Filter questions require the interviewer to ask questions of some respondents but not others. For example, the question:

For which political party did you vote at the last general election?

presumes that the respondent did in fact vote. This option can be reflected in the fixed-choice answers that are provided, so that one of these is a 'did not vote' alternative. However, a better solution is not to presume anything about voting behaviour but to ask respondents whether they voted in the last general election and then to filter out those who did not vote. The foregoing question about the political party voted for can then be asked of those who did in fact vote. Similarly, in a study of meals, there is no point in asking vegetarians lots of questions about eating meat. It will probably work out best to filter vegetarians out and then possibly ask them a separate series of questions. Tips and skills 'Instructions for interviewers in the use of a filter question' provides a simple example in connection with an imaginary study of alcohol consumption. The chief point to register about this example is that it requires clear instructions for the interviewer. If such instructions are not provided, there is the risk that either respondents will be asked inappropriate questions (which can be irritating for them) or

the interviewer will inadvertently fail to ask a question (which results in missing information).

Question order

In addition to interviewers being warned about the importance of not varying the asking of questions and the recording of answers, they should be alerted to the importance of keeping to the order of asking questions.

For one thing, varying the question order can result in certain questions being accidentally omitted, because the interviewer may forget to ask those that have been leap-frogged during the interview. Also, variation in question order may have an impact on replies: if some respondents have been previously asked a question that they should have been asked whereas others have not, a source of variability in the asking of questions will have been introduced and therefore a potential source of error.



Tips and skills

Instructions for interviewers in the use of a filter question

Each of the following questions includes an instruction to the interviewer about how to proceed.

1. Have you consumed any alcoholic drinks in the last twelve months?

Yes _____

No _____

(if **No** proceed to question 4)

2. (To be asked if interviewee replied **Yes** to question 1)

Which of the following alcoholic drinks do you consume most frequently?

(Ask respondent to choose the category that he or she drinks most frequently and tick one category only.)

Beer _____

Spirits _____

Wine _____

Liquors _____

Other _____ specify _____

3. How frequently do you consume alcoholic drinks?

(Ask interviewee to choose the category that comes closest to his or her current practice.)

Daily _____

Most days _____

Once or twice a week _____

Once or twice a month _____

A few times a year _____

Once or twice a year _____

4. (To be asked if interviewee replied **No** to question 1)

Have you ever consumed alcoholic drinks?

Yes _____

No _____

Quite a lot of research has been carried out on the general subject of question order, but few if any consistent effects on people's responses that derive from

asking questions at different points in a questionnaire or interview schedule have been unveiled. Different effects have been demonstrated on various occasions.

A study in the USA found that people were less likely to say that their taxes were too high when they had been previously asked whether government spending ought to be increased in a number of areas (Schuman and Presser 1981: 32). Apparently, some people perceived an inconsistency between wanting more spending and lower taxes, and adjusted their answers accordingly. Research on crime victimization in the USA suggests that earlier questions may affect the salience of later issues (Schuman and Presser 1981: 45). Respondents were asked whether they had been victims of crime in the preceding twelve months. Some respondents had been previously asked a series of questions about their attitudes to crime, whereas others had not. Those who had been asked about their attitudes reported considerably more crime than those who had not been asked.

Mayhew (2000) provides an interesting anecdote on question order in relation to the British Crime Survey. Each wave of the BCS has included the question:

Taking everything into account, would you say the police in this area do a good job or a poor job?

In 1988 this question appeared twice by mistake for some respondents! For all respondents it appeared early on, but for around half it also appeared later on in the context of questions on contact with the police. Of those given the question twice, 66 per cent gave the same rating, but 22 per cent gave a more positive rating to the police and just 13 per cent gave a less favourable one. Mayhew suggests that, as the interview wore on, respondents became more sensitized to crime-related issues and more sympathetic to the pressures on the police.

However, it is difficult to draw general lessons from such research, at least in part because experiments in question order do not always reveal clear-cut effects of varying the order in which questions are asked, even in cases where effects might legitimately have been expected. There are two general lessons.

1. Within a survey, question order should not be varied (unless, of course, question order is the subject of the study!).
2. Researchers should be sensitive to the possible implications of the effect of early questions on answers to subsequent questions.

The following rules about question order are sometimes proposed.

- Early questions should be directly related to the topic of the research, about which the respondent has been informed. This removes the possibility that the respondent will be wondering at an early stage in the interview why he or she is being asked apparently irrelevant questions. This injunction means that personal questions about age, social background, and so on should *not* be asked at the beginning of an interview.
- As far as possible, questions that are more likely to be salient to respondents should be asked early in the interview schedule, so that their interest and attention are more likely to be secured. This suggestion may conflict with the previous one, in that questions specifically on the research topic may not be obviously salient to respondents, but it implies that as far as possible questions relating to the research topic that are more likely to grab their attention should be asked at or close to the start of the interview.
- Potentially embarrassing questions or ones that may be a source of anxiety should be left till later. In fact, research should be designed to ensure that, as far as possible, respondents are not discomfited, but it has to be acknowledged that with certain topics this effect may be unavoidable.
- With a long schedule or questionnaire, questions should be grouped into sections, since this allows a better flow than skipping from one topic to another.
- Within each group of questions, general questions should precede specific ones. Tips and skills 'A sequence of questions on the topic of identity cards' provides an illustration of such a sequence, which follows the recommendations of Gallup (1947, cited in Foddy 1993: 61–2). The example is concerned to demonstrate how the approach might operate in connection with identity cards, which have been an area of discussion and some controversy in the UK in recent years. The question order sequence is designed with a number of features in mind. It is designed to establish people's levels of knowledge of identity cards before asking questions about it and to distinguish those who feel strongly about it from those who do not. According to Foddy (1993), the second question is always open ended, so that respondents' frames of references can be established with respect to the topic at hand. However, it seems likely that, if sufficient pilot research has been carried out, a closed question could be envisaged, a point that applies equally to question 4.



Tips and skills

A sequence of questions on the topic of identity cards

1. Have you heard of identity cards?
Yes ____ No ____
2. What are your views about identity cards?
3. Do you favour or not favour identity cards?
Favour ____ Not favour ____
4. Why do you favour (not favour) identity cards?
5. How strongly do you feel about this?
Very strongly ____
Fairly strongly ____
Not at all strongly ____

- A further aspect of the rule that general questions should precede specific ones is that it has been argued that, when a specific question comes before a general one, the aspect of the general question that is covered by the specific one is discounted in the minds of respondents because they feel they have already covered it. Thus, if a question about how people feel about the amount they are paid precedes a general question about job satisfaction, there are grounds for thinking that respondents will discount the issue of pay when responding about job satisfaction.
- It is sometimes recommended that questions dealing with opinions and attitudes should precede questions to do with behaviour and knowledge. This is because it is felt that behaviour and knowledge questions are less affected by question order than questions that tap opinions and attitudes.
- During the course of an interview, it sometimes happens that a respondent provides an answer to a question that is to be asked later in the interview. Because of the possibility of a question order effect, when the interviewer arrives at the question that appears already to have been answered, it should be repeated.

However, question order effects remain one of the more frustrating areas of structured interview and questionnaire design, because of the inconsistent evidence that is found and because it is difficult to formulate generalizations or rules from the evidence that does point to their operation. An interesting discussion about question order took place some years ago in connection with the study of social class and is discussed in Thinking deeply 9.2.



Thinking deeply 9.2

A debate about question order

An interesting case of the issue of question order becoming a focus of controversy is provided by the research on social class by Marshall et al. (1988), which is referred to in more detail in Research in focus 7.4 and 9.2. In a critique of the research, Saunders (1989) argues that it reveals what he calls 'socialist preconceptions', implying that values overtly intruded into the research (see Figure 2.3). Saunders argues that one way in which this was revealed was the sheer weight of questions about social class prior to respondents being asked about the groups to which they saw themselves as belonging. Saunders (1989: 4) writes:

A glance at their questionnaire reveals that respondents were bombarded with questions about class right from the start of the interview. Following no fewer than 28 detailed questions about the class system, respondents were then asked if they thought they belonged to any social class and whether there was, by any chance, any other grouping they identified with apart from their class. Not surprisingly, most agreed that they did belong to one class or another . . . and that they could not think of any other identity . . . Armed with their 'findings', the authors then conclude that we are all class-oriented after all and that other identities are far less important.

Two of the book's authors replied with a spirited rebuttal. They replied that

the question about class was preceded by 30 substantive items. Six of these have no obvious relationship to the issue of social identities; for example, they elicit perceptions of Britain's economic performance. . . . No less than 17 . . . were specifically designed to make interviewees see the world in terms other than those of social class. They invited people to think of themselves as consumers . . . as voters . . . as members of ethnic or gender groupings; as employees . . . in short, as everything but members of an identifiable social class. Interviewees were also asked whether there were 'any important conflicts in Britain today' before the word social class was ever mentioned. Then, and only then, were they quizzed about their perception of Britain as a specifically class society. (Marshall and Rose 1989: 5)

This is an interesting debate because it raises the issue of the role of values and bias in social research and also because it relates to the issue of question order while demonstrating the difficulty of being definitive about the issue. For example, while Marshall and Rose's reply is convincing, it might be that it is the *relative number* of questions about social class preceding questions of identity that may have been influential and to which Saunders alludes. Nonetheless, the debate usefully demonstrates the difficulty of producing conclusive evidence about question order effects.

Probing

Probing is a highly problematic area for researchers employing a structured interview method. It frequently happens in interviews that respondents need help with their answers. One obvious case is where it is evident that they do not understand the question—they may either ask for further information or it is clear from what they say that they are struggling to understand the question or to provide an adequate answer. The second kind of situation the interviewer faces is when the respondent does not provide a sufficiently complete answer and has to be probed for more information. The problem in either situation is obvious: the interviewer's intervention may influence the respondent, and the nature of interviewers' interventions may differ. A potential source of variability in respondents' replies that does not reflect 'true' variation is introduced—that is, error.

Some general tactics with regard to probes are as follows.

- If further information is required, usually in the context of an open question, standardized probes can be employed, such as 'Could you say a little more about that?' or 'Are there any other reasons why you think that?' or simply 'mmm . . . ?'.
- If the problem is that when presented with a closed question the respondent replies in a way that does not allow the interviewer to select one of the pre-designed answers, the interviewer should repeat the fixed-choice alternatives and make it apparent that the answer needs to be chosen from the ones that have been provided.
- If the interviewer needs to know about something that requires quantification, such as the number of visits to building societies in the last four weeks or the number of building societies in which the respondent has accounts, but the respondent resists this by answering in general terms ('quite often' or 'I usually go to the building society every week'), the interviewer needs to persist with securing a number from the respondent. This will usually entail repeating the question. The interviewer should not try to second guess a figure on the basis of the respondent's reply and then suggest that figure to him or her, since the latter may be unwilling to demur from the interviewer's suggested figure.

However, from the point of view of standardizing the asking of questions in surveys using structured interviewing, probing should be kept to a minimum (assuming it cannot be eliminated) because it introduces error. This occurs because it is impossible for interviewers to probe in a consistent manner and because interviewer effects are more likely to occur, whereby characteristics of the interviewer have an impact on the respondent's replies (Groves et al. 2004: 281–2).

Prompting

Prompting occurs when the interviewer suggests a possible answer to a question to the respondent. The key prerequisite here is that all respondents receive the same prompts. All closed questions entail standardized prompting, because the respondent is provided with a list of possible answers from which to choose. An unacceptable approach to prompting would be to ask an open question and to suggest possible answers only to some respondents, such as those who appear to be struggling to think of an appropriate reply.

During the course of a face-to-face interview, there are several circumstances in which it will be better for the interviewer to use 'show cards' rather than rely on reading out a series of fixed-choice alternatives. Show cards (sometimes called 'flash cards') display all the answers from which the respondent is to choose and are handed to the respondent at different points of the interview. Three kinds of context in which it might be preferable to employ show cards rather than to read out the entire set of possible answers are as follows.

- There may be a very long list of possible answers. For example, respondents may be asked which daily newspaper they each read most frequently. To read out a list of newspapers would be tedious, and it is probably better to hand the respondent a list of newspapers from which to choose.
- Sometimes, during the course of interviews, respondents are presented with a group of questions to which the same possible answers are attached. An example of this strategy is Likert scaling, an approach to attitude measurement that was discussed in Key concept 7.2. The components of a Likert scale are often referred to as *items* rather than as *questions*, since strictly speaking respondents are not being asked questions but are presented with statements to which they are asked to indicate their levels of agreement. See Research in focus 7.2 and 7.5 for examples. It would be excruciatingly dull to read out all five or seven possible answers ten times. Also, it may be expecting too much of respondents to read out the answers once and then require them to keep the possible answers in their heads for the entire batch of questions to which they apply. A show card that can be used for the entire batch and to which respondents can constantly refer is an obvious solution. As was mentioned in Key concept 7.2, most Likert scales of this kind comprise five levels of agreement/disagreement, and it is this more conventional approach that is illustrated in the show card in Tips and skills 'A show card'.



Tips and skills

A show card

Card 6

Strongly agree

Agree

Undecided

Disagree

Strongly disagree

- Some people are not keen to divulge personal details such as their age or their income. One way of neutralizing the impact of such questioning is to

present respondents with age or income bands with a letter or number attached to each band. They can then be asked to say which letter/number applies to

them (see Tips and skills 'Another show card'). This procedure will obviously not be appropriate if the research requires *exact* ages or incomes. It may be

extendable to sensitive areas such as number of sexual partners or sexual practices for the same kinds of reason.



Tips and skills

Another show card

Card 11

1. Below 20
2. 20–29
3. 30–39
4. 40–49
5. 50–59
6. 60–69
7. 70 and over



Student experience

The need for structure in a survey interview

Joe Thompson's survey research on students and their views of accommodation and facilities at his university was part of a team project. After he and other members of his team had piloted the interview schedule, they decided that it was not sufficiently structured. They felt that they needed to impose more structure and decided to use show cards (he refers to them by their other common name 'cue cards').

The group therefore used opportunistic sampling to test if the questionnaire would be successful when applied in a social setting, having to give the questionnaire to one person over the week. The following week the group discussed the issues they had encountered when carrying out the pilot questionnaire, raising amongst others the concern of not having a standard interview procedure, which would mean that certain biases could affect the results. Therefore the group decided they would use cue cards when giving the options in answer to the question, so as to avoid leading questions, etc. After these changes were implemented, the final version of the questionnaire was produced.



To read more about Joe's research experiences, go to the Online Resource Centre that accompanies this book at: www.oxfordtextbooks.co.uk/orc/brymansrm4e/

Leaving the interview

Do not forget common courtesies like thanking respondents for giving up their time. But the period immediately after the interview is one in which some care is necessary, in that sometimes respondents try to engage the interviewer in a discussion about the purpose of the interview. Interviewers should resist elaboration beyond

their standard statement, because respondents may communicate what they are told to others, which may bias the findings.

Training and supervision

On several occasions, reference has been made to the need for interviewers to be trained. The standard texts on

survey research and on interviewing practice tend to be replete with advice on how best to train interviewers. Such advice is typically directed at contexts in which a researcher hires an interviewer to conduct a large amount or even all the interviews. It also has considerable importance in research in which several interviewers (who may be either collaborators or hired interviewers) are involved in a study, since the risk of interviewer variability in the asking of questions needs to be avoided.

For many readers of this book who are planning to do research, such situations are unlikely to be relevant because they will be 'lone' researchers. You may be doing an undergraduate dissertation, or an exercise for a research methods course, or you may be a postgraduate conducting research for a Master's dissertation or for a thesis. Most people in such a situation will not have the luxury of being able to hire a researcher to do any interviewing (though you may be able to find someone to help you a little). When interviewing on your own, you must in a sense train yourself to follow the procedures and advice provided above. This is a very different situation from a large research institute or market research agency, which relies on an army of hired interviewers who carry out the interviews. Whenever people other than the lead researcher are involved in interviewing, they will need training and supervision in the following areas:

- contacting prospective respondents and providing an introduction to the study;
- reading out questions as written and following instructions in the interview schedule (for example, in connection with filter questions);
- using appropriate styles of probing;
- recording exactly what is said;
- maintaining an interview style that does not bias respondents' answers.

Fowler (1993) cites evidence that suggests that training of less than one full day rarely creates good interviewers.

Supervision of interviewers in relation to these issues can be achieved by:

- checking individual interviewers' response rates;
- tape-recording at least a sample of interviews;
- examining completed schedules to determine whether any questions are being left out or if they are being completed properly;
- call-backs on a sample of respondents (usually around 10 per cent) to determine whether they were interviewed and to ask about interviewers' conduct.

Research in focus 9.2 provides an example of some of the ingredients of research involving multiple interviewers.



Research in focus 9.2

An example of research involving multiple interviewers

This example is taken from the study by Marshall et al. (1988), a team of sociologists from the University of Essex, of social class in modern Britain (see Research in focus 7.4). The interviewing was carried out by a leading independent social research institute, Social and Community Planning Research (SCPR). The research aimed to achieve a sample of 2,000 respondents (1,770 was the number actually achieved; see Research in focus 8.1 for details of the sampling procedure).

One hundred and twenty-three interviewers were employed on the survey. Six full-time briefing sessions were held, all of which were attended by a member of the Essex team, and interviewers were also given a full set of written instructions. The first three interviews conducted by each interviewer were subjected to an immediate thorough checking in order that critical comments, where appropriate, could be conveyed. During the course of fieldwork the work of interviewers was subject to personal recall. Ten per cent of issued addresses were re-issued for recall . . . In addition, 36 interviewers were accompanied in the field by supervisors . . . (Marshall et al. 1988: 291)



Problems with structured interviewing

While the structured interview is a commonly used method of social research, certain problems associated with it have been identified over the years. These problems are not necessarily unique to the structured interview, in that they can sometimes be attributed to kindred methods, such as the self-completion questionnaire in survey research or even semi-structured interviewing in qualitative research. However, it is common for the structured interview to be seen as a focus for the identification of certain limitations, which are briefly examined below.

Characteristics of interviewers

There is evidence that interviewers' attributes can have an impact on respondents' replies, but, unfortunately, the literature on this issue does not lend itself to definitive generalizations. In large part, this ambiguity in the broader implications of experiments relating to the effects of interviewer characteristics is due to several problems, such as: the problem of disentangling the effects of interviewers' different attributes from each other (race, gender, socio-economic status); the interaction between the characteristics of interviewers and the characteristics of respondents; and the interaction between any effects observed and the topic of the interview. Nonetheless, there is undoubtedly some evidence that effects due to characteristics of interviewers can be discerned.

The ethnicity of interviewers is one area that has attracted some attention. Schuman and Presser (1981) cite a study that asked respondents to nominate two or three of their favourite actors or entertainers. Respondents were much more likely to mention black actors or entertainers when interviewed by black interviewers than when interviewed by white ones. Schuman and Converse (1971) interviewed 619 black Detroiters shortly after Martin Luther King's assassination in 1969. The researchers found significant differences in the answers given between black and white interviewers in around one-quarter of the questions asked.

Although this proportion is quite disturbing, the fact that the majority of questions appear to have been largely unaffected does not give rise to a great deal of confidence that a consistent biasing factor is being uncovered. Similarly inconclusive findings tend to occur in relation to experiments with other sets of characteristics of

interviewers. These remarks are not meant to play down the potential significance of interviewers' characteristics for measurement error, but to draw attention to the limitations of drawing conclusive inferences about the evidence. All that needs to be registered at this juncture is that almost certainly the characteristics of interviewers do have an impact on respondents' replies but that the extent and nature of the impact are not clear and are likely to vary from context to context.

Response sets

Some writers have suggested that the structured interview is particularly prone to the operation among respondents of what Webb et al. (1966: 19) call 'response sets', which they define as 'irrelevant but lawful sources of variance'. This form of response bias is especially relevant to multiple-indicator measures (see Chapter 7), where respondents reply to a battery of related questions or items, of the kind found in a Likert scale (see Key concept 7.2). The idea of a response set implies that people respond to the series of questions in a consistent way but one that is irrelevant to the concept being measured. Two of the most prominent types of response set are known as the 'acquiescence' (also known as the 'yeasaying' and 'naysaying' effect) and the **social desirability** effect.

Acquiescence

Acquiescence refers to a tendency for some people consistently to agree or disagree with a set of questions or items. Imagine a respondent who replied with agreement to all the items in Research in focus 7.2. The problem is that agreement with some of the items implies a low level of commitment to work (items 1–4), whereas agreement with others implies a high level of commitment to work (items 5–10). One of the reasons why researchers who employ this kind of multiple-item measure use wordings that imply opposite stances (that is, some items implying a high level of commitment and others implying a low level of commitment to work) is to weed out those respondents who appear to be replying within the framework of an acquiescence response set.

Social desirability bias

The social desirability effect refers to evidence that some respondents' answers to questions are related to their

perception of the social desirability of those answers. An answer that is perceived to be socially desirable is more likely to be endorsed than one that is not. This phenomenon has been demonstrated in studies on mental health using psychiatric inventories. These inventories are meant to be concerned not with chronic mental illness but with minor neuroses and anxieties. Research in New York by Dohrenwend (1966) noted that Puerto Ricans tended to score much higher on the inventory that he administered than other ethnic groups. He found that this tendency was not due to a higher level of mental illness in this ethnic group, but to the effect of social desirability in respondents' answers. Puerto Ricans were much less likely than the other ethnic groups to perceive the items in the inventory as undesirable. This meant that what the researcher had found was a link not between ethnicity and mental health, but between ethnicity and perceptions of the social desirability of mental health inventory items. Later research suggested that variation in the social desirability of mental illness symptoms was related to the perceived prevalence of those symptoms among the respondent's friends and acquaintances (Phillips 1973). The presence of social desirability effects has been demonstrated in other settings (e.g. Arnold and Feldman 1981).

In so far as these forms of response error go undetected, they represent sources of error in the measurement of concepts. However, while some writers have proposed outright condemnation of social research on the basis of evidence of response sets (e.g. Phillips 1973), it is important not to get carried away with such findings. We cannot be sure how prevalent these effects are, and to some extent awareness of them has led to measures to limit their impact on data (for example, by weeding out cases obviously affected by them or by instructing interviewers to limit the possible impact of the social desirability effect by not becoming overly friendly with respondents and by not being judgemental about their replies).

The problem of meaning

A critique of survey interview data and findings gleaned from similar techniques was developed by social scientists influenced by phenomenological and other interpretivist ideas of the kinds touched on in Chapter 2 (Cicourel 1964, 1982; Filmer et al. 1972; Briggs 1986; Mishler 1986). This critique revolves around what is often referred to in a shorthand way as the 'problem of meaning'. The kernel of the argument is that when humans communicate they do so in a way that not only

draws on commonly held meanings but also simultaneously creates meanings. 'Meaning' in this sense is something that is worked at and achieved—it is not simply pre-given. Allusions to the problem of meaning in structured interviewing draw attention to the notion that survey researchers presume that interviewer and respondent share the same meanings of terms employed in the interview questions and answers. In fact, the problem of meaning implies that the possibility that interviewer and respondent may not be sharing the same meaning systems and hence imply different things in their use of words is simply sidestepped in structured interview research. The problem of meaning is resolved by ignoring it.

The feminist critique

The feminist critique of structured interviewing is difficult to disentangle from the critique launched against quantitative research in general, which was briefly outlined in Chapter 2. However, for many feminist social researchers the structured interview symbolizes more readily than other methods the limitations of quantitative research, partly because of its prevalence but also partly because of its nature. By 'its nature' is meant the fact that the structured interview epitomizes the asymmetrical relationship between researcher and subject that is seen as an ingredient of quantitative research: the researcher extracts information from the research subject and gives nothing in return. For example, standard textbook advice of the kind provided in this chapter implies that rapport is useful to the interviewer but he or she should guard against becoming too familiar. This means that questions asked by respondents (for example, about the research or about the topic of the research) should be politely but firmly rebuffed on the grounds that too much familiarity should be avoided and because the respondents' subsequent answers may be biased.

This is perfectly valid and appropriate advice from the vantage point of the canons of structured interviewing with its quest for standardization and for valid and reliable data. However, from the perspective of feminism, when women interview women a wedge is hammered between them that, in conjunction with the implication of a hierarchical relationship between the interviewer and respondent, is incompatible with its values. An impression of exploitation is created, but exploitation of women is precisely what feminist social science seeks to fight against. Oakley (1981) found in her research on childbirth that she was frequently asked questions by

her respondents. It was these questions that typified the problems of being a feminist interviewing women.

The dilemma of a feminist interviewer interviewing women could be summarised by considering the practical application of some of the strategies recommended in the textbooks for meeting interviewees' questions. For example, these advise that such questions as 'Which hole does the baby come out of?' 'Does an epidural ever paralyse women?' and 'Why is it dangerous to leave a small baby alone in the house?' should be met with such responses from the interviewer as 'I guess I haven't thought enough about it to give a good answer right now', or 'a head-shaking gesture which suggests "that's a hard one"' (Goode and Hatt [1952: 198]). (Oakley 1981: 48)

Such advice still appears in textbooks concerned with survey research. For example, Groves et al. (2004: 283) supply the following advice:

1. Interviewers should refrain from expressing views or opinions on the topics covered by the survey instrument.
2. Interviewers should refrain from presenting any personal information that might provide a bias for inferring what their preferences or values might be that are relevant to the content of the interview.
3. Although a little informal chatting about neutral topics, such as the weather or pets, may help to free up communication, for the most part, interviewers should focus on the task.

This is in fact good advice from the point of view of reducing error that might arise from the interviewer influencing or biasing the interviewee's replies. As such, it is likely to reduce error arising from the influence of the interviewer.

Oakley's point is that to act according to such canons of textbook practice would be irresponsible for a feminist in such a situation. It was this kind of critique of structured interviewing and indeed of quantitative research in general that ushered in a period in which a great many feminist social researchers found qualitative research more compatible with their goals and norms. In terms of interviewing, this trend resulted in a preference for forms of interviewing such as unstructured and semi-structured interviewing and focus groups. These will be the focus of later chapters. However, as noted in Chapter 2, there has been some softening of attitudes towards the role of quantitative research among feminist researchers. For example, Walby and Myhill (2001) have shown how surveys of violence against women that are dedicated to uncovering such violence (rather than general crime surveys like the BCS) reveal higher levels than are often thought to occur. By paying greater attention to issues like greater privacy in the interview and special training in sensitive interviewing, dedicated surveys in some countries have proved highly instructive about the causes and incidence of violence against women. Such research, which is based on structured interviewing, would not seem to be inconsistent with the goals of most feminist researchers and indeed may be of considerable significance for many women. Nonetheless, there is still a tendency for qualitative research to remain the preferred research strategy for many feminist researchers.



Key points

- The structured interview is a research instrument that is used to standardize the asking and often the recording of answers in order to keep interviewer-related error to a minimum.
- The structured interview can be administered in person or over the telephone.
- It is important to keep to the wording and order of questions when conducting survey research by structured interview.
- While there is some evidence that interviewers' characteristics can influence respondents' replies, the findings of experiments on this issue are somewhat equivocal.
- Response sets can be damaging to data derived from structured interviews and steps need to be taken to identify respondents exhibiting them.
- The structured interview symbolizes the characteristics of quantitative research that feminist researchers find distasteful: in particular, the lack of reciprocity and the taint of exploitation.



Questions for review

The structured interview

- Why is it important in interviewing for survey research to keep interviewer variability to a minimum?
- How successful is the structured interview in reducing interviewer variability?
- Why might a survey researcher prefer to use a structured rather than an unstructured interview approach for gathering data?
- Why do structured interview schedules typically include mainly closed questions?

Interview contexts

- Are there any circumstances in which it might be preferable to conduct structured interviews with more than one interviewer present?
- 'Given the lower cost of telephone interviewing compared to face-to-face interviews, the former is generally preferable.' Discuss.

Conducting interviews

- Prepare an opening statement for a study of manual workers in a firm, to which access has already been achieved.
- To what extent is rapport an important ingredient of structured interviewing?
- How strong is the evidence that question order can significantly affect answers?
- How strong is the evidence that interviewers' characteristics can significantly affect answers?
- What is the difference between probing and prompting? How important are they and what dangers are lurking with their use?

Problems with structured interviewing

- What are response sets and why are they potentially important?
- What are the main issues that lie behind the critique of structured interviewing by feminist researchers?



Online Resource Centre

www.oxfordtextbooks.co.uk/orc/brymansrm4e/

Visit the Online Resource Centre that accompanies this book to enrich your understanding of structured interviewing. Consult web links, test yourself using multiple choice questions, and gain further guidance and inspiration from the Student Researcher's Toolkit.